DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 045 CG 013 446

AUTHOR Dienstbier, Richard A.
TITLE Exposure to Theories of Conscience as a Determinant of Cheating.
PUB DATE [75]
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attribution Theory; *Behavior Patterns; *Cheating; College Students; *Emotional Response; Females; Locus of Control; *Reactive Behavior; Research Projects; Self Control; *Student Behavior

ABSTRACT

Cheating behavior has been found to relate to emotion-attribution explanations. Prior research with second-grade children has indicated that increased self-control occurs in a watching task when the child's emotional response is attributed to internal rather than external actions. In the present study, freshman women (N=221) took a reading comprehension test about conscience development which was either similar to the children's internal or external orientation; control subjects read about memory. Results indicate that the predicted low cheating rate (15%) on a vocabulary test by the internal-condition subjects was significantly different from the external (30%) or the control (31%) subjects. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED172045

Exposure to Theories of Conscience As a Determinant of Cheating

Richard A. Dienstbier

Psychology Department

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

209 Burnett Hall

Lincoln, NE 68588

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R A Dienstbier

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Abstract

Previous research had indicated that college students cheated more when they attributed arousal (rather than benign) symptoms to a placebo pill. Research with 2nd grade children reinforced the emotion-attribution explanation, with increased self control in a watching task when the child's emotional response to the task was attributed to the child's own actions (internal) rather than to others finding out about the child's actions (external). In the present study, freshmen women read a "reading comprehension test" about conscience development which was either similar to the children's internal condition or externally oriented; control subjects read about memory. The predicted low cheating rate (15%) on a vocabulary test by the internal-condition subjects was significantly different from the external (30%) or the control (31%) subjects.

CG013446

Exposure to Theories of Conscience as a Determinant of Cheating

Richard A. Dienstbier

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Previous research (Dienstbier & Munter, 1971; Dienstbier, 1972) had indicated that in a temptation situation male and female college students who attributed arousal symptoms to the side effects of a placebo pill cheated more than control subjects who attributed arousal-irrelevant side effects to their placebos. It was suggested that when arousal which is normally effective in inhibiting transgression is attributed to an irrevelant (and in a sense, external) source, that the arousal loses its transgression-inhibiting impact.

Later research with second grade children of both sexes in a very different paradigm (Dienstbier et al., 1975) supported that interpretation. In the first phase of the boring slotcar watching task, after children were distracted from the task for 6 continuous seconds, the slotcar flew off the track (the accident which the child was to have prevented) and the experimenter returned immediately. The child's emotional reaction was attributed to the child feeling badly due to having not done a good job watching (internal attribution) or to feeling badly due to the experimenter knowing that the child had done a bad job (external). The second phase of the watching task was presented to children as a detection-free situation in which neither good nor poor performance at the watching task could be detected. Children given the internal emotion attribution information performed significantly better in the subsequent watching task than the external-information subjects. In subsequent research, children with no experience at the watching task (Dienstbier, 1978) were told about a child who did a poor

job "yesterday." Those who were told that the child felt bad due to having done a bad job (internal) subsequently performed much better in the detection-free version of the watching task than did children who were told that yesterday's child felt bad due to the experimenter finding out about the bad job (external).

The present research was done in order to extend a version of the children's paradigm to adults in the cheating research situation. That is, it was predicted that adults who read about an internal version of how conscience functioned (in the context of a reading comprehension test) would cheat less on a vocabulary test than would either college students who read an "external" explanation of the functioning of conscience or students who read a control passage about memory.

Method

Subjects: Two hundred and twenty-one freshmen women signed up for this study in partial fulfillment of a research or library research option which is a requirement of the basic psychology course. Freshmen were used (and the study run early in the fall semester) to minimize subject sophistication in this deception research. Only women were used since my previous research (cited above) had indicated that while both sexes respond to emotion-attribution information with differential cheating, very different levels of pressure are necessary to achieve the effect for members of the two sexes. (This is not true with children, so all that cited research involves both sexes in each study).

Procedure: After signing up for a study on "verbal knowledge and skills" subjects reported to the laboratory in groups of 6 to 10 and were seated in a row of booths so that they could not see each other. Via tape-recorded instructions the experimenter explained that this was "his dissertation research" (to make later cheating an obviously "moral"

offense). While the vocabulary test was being distributed, it was explained that the purpose of this test was to be able to compare "differences in vocabulary development between different types of students -- those who will succeed in certain college courses and those who may fail." It was explained that most successful freshmen score at least 18 on the 30-item test. Subsequent to completing the vocabulary test, a "reading comprehension test" was distributed with the explanation that the reading topics were all about psychology since that was the one area with which all subjects had equal experience. The first such test, concerning touch sensitivity, was included only to support the cover story; the second reading test constituted the independent manipulation.

The control condition subjects, determined by the random distribution of test booklets (allowing the experimenter to remain blind) read a 500-word passage about memory. External-condition subjects read about "The Development of Moral Self-Control" in a passage of similar length; the passage explained that for children tension results from confrontation with socializing agents over transgressions, so that the individual later resists temptation in order to "avoid the emotional tension which is tied to the risk of being found out." Internal-condition subjects read that tension results from the child considering the violation of the child's own moral rules, so that the individual later resists temptation in order to "avoid the emotional tension even though no one else may ever know of the transgression." While the passages were designed to cause the subjects to believe that emotional tension may be attributed to different sources, the passages were carefully balanced in suggesting that strong tension in the face

of temptation is effective in preventing transgression. The first test following the reading comprehension passage was designed to support the distinctions of the passages. It was then explained that there would be a subsequent second test over the passage, after a delay so that long-term recall could be tested. This was done to encourage subjects to think about the passages during the delay period during which cheating on the vocabulary test was possible. As in my previous research on cheating, subjects were shown the correct answers to the vocabulary test and given an excuse to use their pencils and erasers to darken answers and clean up erasures on the machine-gradable answer paper. However, subjects were warned "don't change any answers -- I really need accurate data for my thesis or I may have to spend another semester trying." One and one half minutes into the delay period, the experimenter caused the phone in the lab to ring and had a short conversation in which it was obvious that he had been asked to leave the lab to look for something. The experimenter subsequently spent 3 minutes in a near-by room, loudly searching through desk drawers. After the total 5-minute "delay" period was up, the experimenter asked subjects to answer the final (manipulation check) reading comprehension questions over the independent variable passage, had subjects fill out a very detailed post-experimental questionnaire concerning suspicions, and debriefed the subjects completely concerning the true meaning and purpose of all aspects of the research.

Results

Of the 221 subjects, 17 were dropped due to indicating suspicion in response to the direct and specific questions of the post-experimental

questinnaire (e.g. "did you form any suspicions or ideas that the experiment was about cheating?"). Seven subjects were lost due to not pressing sufficiently on the machine-gradable answer paper to make an impression on the pressure-sensitive paper underneath (underneath during the taking of the test, but not during the cheating period), so that cheating could not be detected. (The technique of detecting cheating is described elsewhere (Dienstbier & Munter, 1971.)) Two subjects scored over the criterion 18 correct without cheating (eliminating temptation); one was not a freshman; one was not English-speaking (as primary language).

The manipulation check question, answered after the end of the cheating period, was answered correctly by 83% of the internal and external-condition subjects (a different answer was required for subjects in the two conditions).

Cheating was defined as changing at least one answer from incorrect to correct during the "cheating" period. Since no hypothesis about the relationship between the external and control group was made (since it was not certain whether the external manipulation would be "neutral" or would encourage cheating), tests of the hypothesis concerned a comparison of the cheating rates of the internal condition subjects (15%, or 10 of 66 subjects) with those of the external subjects (30% or 20 of 66 subjects) and of the control subjects (31% or 19 of 61 subjects). The first comparison yields a Chi Square of 4.31 ($p < .05$, two tailed) and the second a Chi Square of 4.60 ($p < .05$, two tailed). These are not independent tests, however, since the same internal-condition data are used in each comparison.

Conclusions

It has been suggested in previous writing (Dienstbier et al., 1975; Dienstbier, 1978) that one of the most important ways in which self control in moral dilemmas may be understood is through a consideration of the emotion attributions which are made by the tempted individual. Emotional arousal experienced in the context of temptation has different meaning and therefore different implications for the individual's behavior depending upon the attributions made concerning the cause of that arousal. The approach holds promise for explicating how traditional socialization approaches facilitate or inhibit the development of moral behavior, and for suggesting ways in which conscience can be made more internal (dependent upon the individual's values) rather than external (dependent upon externally mediated control). In a culture which seems increasingly mobile and age-stratified, such an internal emphasis seems overdue.

The importance of the present study is three-fold:

First, the study provides confirmation for the emotion-attribution approach by providing a theoretical and methodological bridge between previous studies. On the one hand the effect had been demonstrated on cheating rates with college-age adults through arousal attribution information conveyed in physiological terms via the placebo pill technique. On the other hand, children's self control in watching tasks had been influenced by an attribution technique which closely resembled that of the present study (explaining how conscience worked). Although both types of studies were derived from a common underlying theory, differences of subject age, independent manipulations, and dependent variables weakened the interpretation that they related to similar underlying processes.

Secondly, this study leads to the hope that it may be possible to develope textual educational materials which will aid in the development of a more internal moral orientation. In fact, our present research is directed to that end.

Finally, in relation to the current concern of whether our social psychology has an impact upon those exposed to it, consider the following:

The independent manipulation in the present study depended upon passages presented to the internal and external condition subjects which were essentially statements of rival theoretical approaches, with the external subjects being exposed to (essentially) classical two-factor avoidance theory (e.g. Solomon & Wynn, 1954) as an explanation of conscience, while internal subjects read a more cognitive and self-oriented version of that 2-factor approach.

References

Dienstbier, R.A. The role of anxiety and arousal attribution in cheating. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1972, 8, 168-179.

Dienstbier, R.A. Attribution, Socialization, and Moral Decision making. In New Directions in Attribution Research, Vol II, New York: John Wiley

Dienstbier, R.A., Hillman, D., Lehnhoff, J., Hillman, J., & Valkenaar, M.C. An emotion-attribution approach to moral behavior: interfacing cognitive and avoidance theories of moral development. Psychological Review, 1975, 82, 299-315.

Dienstbier, R.A. & Munter, P.O. Cheating as a function of the labeling of natural arousal. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1971, 7, 208-213.

Solomon, R.L., & Wynne, L.C. Traumatic avoidance learning: The principles of anxiety conservation and partial irreversibility. Psychological Review, 1954, 61, 353-385.